



Association of Michigan  
School Counselors

**Comments Provided to the Michigan Department of Education  
High School Graduation Task Force**

*November 30, 2005*

Superintendent Flanagan, Dr. Jeremy Hughes, and Members of the High School Graduation Task Force, thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments addressing the improvement of high school curriculum and the role of the school counselor in preparing students to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Association of Michigan School Counselors (AMSC) looks forward to working with the Michigan Department of Education in implementing the recommended curriculum. While AMSC supports improvements to the State of Michigan's graduation requirements, it also has identified areas of concern. Below are AMSC's reactions and questions regarding specific sections of the proposal.

Our comments are organized as follows:

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Who is AMSC?

The Association of Michigan School Counselors (AMSC) provides leadership and support for the profession of counseling in K-12 education through advocacy and professional development. AMSC strives to support and enhance the practice of counseling in elementary through high school settings, to promote ethical and responsible professional practice, and to promote communication and exchange among school counselors. AMSC also encourages cooperation with other organizations and associations related to K-16 education.

### B. Support of Curriculum

AMSC supports Superintendent Flanagan's recommendations for statewide high school graduation requirements. As the Guiding Principles state, students must be prepared with the knowledge and skills to succeed in postsecondary education and in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century workplace. We commend that the recommendations recognize all students, regardless of instructional need. One of the primary responsibilities of a school counselor is to deliver accommodations, interventions, and pathways to ensure student success. We recognize this to be consistent with the intent of the proposal and will strive to be leaders in improving our K-16 educational system.

### C. Student-to-Counselor Ratios

In his memo, dated November 8, 2005, to the State Board of Education, Superintendent Flanagan states: "through research, five states were identified as having taken or being in the midst of taking unique steps to rethink and redesign their expectations for high school graduates." Further, he comments that his "recommendations take the best of what was learned from other leading states." The five states that were identified were: Rhode Island, Indiana, Massachusetts, Arkansas, and Oregon. AMSC has reviewed high school counselor-to-student ratios for these five states, as well as Michigan.

**2003-2004 High School Student-to-Counselor Ratios**

STATE	Rhode Island	Arkansas	Indiana	Oregon	Massachusetts	Michigan
RATIO	229:1	227:1	228:1	258:1	168:1	354:1

*U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005.*

Based on recommendations from the American Counseling Association and the American School Counseling Association, there should be one counselor for every 250 students. While these states have recognized that following recommended ratios leads to

student success, Michigan has fallen behind. Empirical research indicates that high schools with fully implemented guidance programs had students that earned higher grades, were better prepared for the future, and had more career and college information available to them. Additionally, other studies show that underachieving students that receive quality guidance and counseling services had significant improvements in mathematics and language arts. If desired, AMSC can provide further documentation regarding this and other research.

This data regarding ratios is significant to Superintendent Flanagan's proposal and subsequent success. It is AMSC's belief that one of the reasons the identified leading states are in such a position is due to the student-to-counselor ratios. The MDE task force identified rigor, relevance, and relationships as key factors relating to a meaningful and quality-based high school education. School counselors are the foundation of relationships within the school.

Connecting students to the school, to other students, and to adults in the building are one of counselors' primary responsibilities. Further, school counselors are in the best position to assess the systemic barriers to academic success for every student. They are the professionals that have access to crucial data including student placements, academic success and failure, and course-taking patterns. They are in communication with teachers, administrators and parents and are able to access human resources in the community. In quoting Dr. Reese House, recently retired from The Education Trust, *"school counselors are the eyes and ears of the school. An effective school counselor hears more, knows more, and understands more about teachers, parents, students, and the community than anyone else in the school."*

Using quantitative and qualitative data, school counselors facilitate and promote school-wide success for all students. Certainly success is a desired outcome of the proposed recommendations. To that end, AMSC believes that serious consideration needs to be given to the growing ratios that are creating unmanageable caseloads. Quality program delivery and student success will be directly related to these ratios.

## **II. Areas Of Concern**

### **A. Career and Technical Education**

AMSC supports a rigorous curriculum and agrees that local control should be given to school districts to integrate the requirements. One area where local control would be crucial is in the area of the delivery of CTE programs. AMSC has concerns regarding students who fail core courses that are on a CTE career pathway. There are districts within the state that have policy statements regarding students' participation in a countywide career/technical education center. Often, eligibility to attend rests on credit status at their home school. Should a student fail one or more of the core courses and repeat the course the subsequent year, it could jeopardize their opportunity at the career/technical center.

## **B. CTE and Highly Qualified Teachers**

AMSC strongly supports the idea of integrating core academic content into CTE courses and many centers are already providing authentic instruction. Ensuring that all CTE teachers are highly qualified under NCLB mandates will place a burden upon these centers and/or districts to ensure that there is staffing and resources available to provide this option. Funding to provide staffing and resources will be needed.

## **C. Math Placement**

AMSC recognizes that research indicates that students who earn credits in intensive high school math courses have a greater likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree than students who do not finish these courses. Certainly, a student's math knowledge doesn't begin in high school, but long before. A student's math level in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade typically determines placement for 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Currently, a student has options regarding their 9<sup>th</sup> grade math course. Most often past performance, achievement and aptitude test scores, and teacher observation determine the decision for placement. The proposal as outlined will place all students, regardless of these factors, into Algebra I. Again, while AMSC supports rigor, it is suggested that consideration be given to the unique capabilities and skills of each student. Further, it is suggested that consideration be given to evaluating math preparation in the earlier grades to ensure student preparedness and success with higher levels of math

## **D. Special Needs Students**

AMSC understands that the ACT has been approved as the vehicle for the Michigan Merit Exam. We support the need for state testing and the use of MI-Access for specific special needs students; a special education student's IEP notes which national standardized and state tests are appropriate for each individual student and includes accommodations for each test.

## **E. Online Course**

Without a doubt, for students to be successful in college and the workplace, they need to have knowledge and competency in the area of technology. AMSC does have some concerns with the delivery of an online course for all students.

Expense, implementation, and monitoring are all concerns. If Michigan Virtual High School (MVHS) were the online vendor it would cost \$275 per student, per course. Unless it can be provided at no cost to school districts, this will be an extremely expensive option. Upgrading and maintaining technology such as high-speed access or technical support are costly budgetary concerns.

Implementation of an online course is key. Certainly benchmarks are highlighted through each online vendor's program, and each vendor sets up its criteria and blackboard system.

However, the actual courses must be implemented at the local level. There are larger school districts that don't participate in online courses due to the high volume of administrative duties. AMSC questions who will administer this task?

Another area to be addressed is the monitoring of students' progress. One of the most obvious resources is a counselor. While a counselor could possibly enroll and monitor a dozen students a year; it would be impossible to manage an entire student body. AMSC recommends that these areas be addressed before such a requirement is made.

### **III. Recommendations**

#### **A. Remediation**

It is AMSC's recommendation that a course of remedial action be implemented, should failure occur in the ninth grade year. This would allow the student to continue on the desired pathway. Remedial plans outside the school would include high caliber summer school, adult education, or online credit recovery programs. While this is recommended, there is still concern regarding the quality and cost of credit recovery options. The intent of Superintendent Flanagan's proposal is to ensure that every student gains knowledge consistent with benchmarks of each content area. To guarantee success, credit recovery programs should also maintain the same standards as those required within a comprehensive high school setting. Again, there is concern regarding the cost to enroll in any remedial course. This can become a financial burden to the student's family as typical course fees range from \$125 to over \$275.

#### **B. Implementation of Recommended Curriculum**

Indeed, a slow and cautious approach would continue to place Michigan behind many other states. But, a carefully planned implementation would more readily guarantee success. As mentioned earlier, AMSC is not convinced that there is enough staffing, particularly in the area of school counselors. AMSC would recommend that the state conduct a staffing assessment to assure that this proposal will be successful. If staffing does need to increase, as AMSC anticipates, the question of funding remains. We realize that the proposal allows flexibility in implementation, especially for districts with limited resources. AMSC supports a waiver system for those school districts. The point remains that some schools may be ill equipped to deliver this curriculum.

### **IV. Closing**

In closing, AMSC would like to work collaboratively with the Michigan Department of Education to deliver curriculum that will adequately prepare students for postsecondary and workplace success. We would like to be an integral part of restoring Michigan as a leader in education. AMSC would like to thank Governor Granholm, Lt. Governor John Cherry, Superintendent Flanagan, Dr. Jeremy Hughes, and the members of the Task Force for their continued dedication to addressing the issue of quality education for students in the State of Michigan.

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## Counselor shortage leaves students adrift

Crisis comes at a time when state leaders increasingly tout the importance of a college degree.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

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The decisions 17-year-old Samira Faraj makes in the next two years could well determine her life's path: whether she will go to college, what career she will choose, and, ultimately, how much she will earn.

"I want to go to college for law school," said Faraj, who would be the first in her family to attend college. "But I kind of want to go into the Army, too. It's either or."

But at a time when Michigan leaders increasingly tout the importance of more students graduating from college, some say the state is crippled by a lack of guidance counselors who can help get them there.

Michigan students get less counseling than those in all but a few other states. There was one counselor for every 619 Michigan students last year, according to the state Center for Educational Performance and Information. That's far below the recommended ratio of 250 students per counselor.

The most recent state-by-state comparisons show Michigan lags all but five other states.

That's a clear disadvantage for students who are unlikely to learn at home what it takes to get into college. Faraj's mother, Kathleen Zriek, 40, dropped out of 10th grade to get married, and had her first child at 18.

"I know I would like my daughter to go to college," said Zriek, who lives in Detroit. "I don't know what she needs to do to get there."

Nationally, there was one counselor for every 477 students in 2002, the last year for which figures are available from the National Center for Education Statistics.

California had the most students per counselor, at 951; Wyoming had the fewest, with 225. Michigan schools aren't required to have counselors. And that makes them an inviting target when cuts are needed. Across Metro Detroit, even well-off districts have few counselors. Utica, Farmington, Brighton and Plymouth-Canton all had more than 600 students per counselor last year.

"We've got 27 counselors districtwide, and it's a direct result of having \$7,025 per kid that we have such a high counselor-student ratio," said James Ryan, superintendent of the Plymouth-Canton district, where the ratio is 642-to-1. "I know they're overworked; we only have two elementary counselors, and they work themselves to the bone."

"Wouldn't it be great if a counselor only had to deal with 300 kids? Our counselors would like to meet proactively with kids; the smaller the number the better the service. But that's not going to happen in Plymouth-Canton."

### Shortfall puts all in a vise

The students who need counseling most often are economically disadvantaged: those with parents who dropped out of high school or didn't attend college, experts say.

These parents may be the least knowledgeable in how to steer their children toward college prep classes or understand the complex college admissions process.

The counselor shortage cuts across income lines. A report by ACT, a national college testing service, found just 53 percent of this year's Michigan graduates who took the ACT took a full load of college prep courses. That's 3 percentage points under the national average.

Taking the wrong classes can lead to lower ACT scores and problems with college admission.

"We worry a lot about the diamonds in the rough, the kids who are first-generation or low-income who have just never thought of themselves going to college," said Pam Horne, director of admissions for Michigan State University.

It also worries Superintendent Mildred Mason in Pontiac, where the 2000 Census found 31 percent of adults had not earned a high school diploma. The 9,918-student district employs just 14 counselors, a ratio of 708-to-1.

"A number of students fall through the cracks because they're not aware of the different opportunities that are available to them just by taking different classes than what shows up on their schedule," Mason said.

Katie Evorian, 21, had to take remedial math during her freshman year at the University of Michigan-Dearborn

because she hadn't taken precalculus or calculus. In high school, she rarely saw a counselor until her senior year. "My first three years, I only went down there two or three times a year, and it was all initiated by me," said the 2002 Novi High School graduate. "I was average in math, so I went as far as I could, but it wasn't going through my head, 'Oh, I better take calculus or I'll have to take remedial math in college.' "

#### System fails youngest pupils

The American School Counselor Association says 30 states require guidance and counseling services in public elementary and/or secondary schools, up from 20 states in 1998. Of the 30, 28 states and the District of Columbia mandate counseling at all levels: elementary, middle and high school.

Most Metro Detroit public school districts concentrate counselors in the high schools, where students need help with college applications, financial aid and other post-high school planning.

Few districts have counselors at the elementary and middle school levels, missing key opportunities for early intervention and guidance.

"We have four counselors at each high school, and one at each middle school. We can't afford counselors in the elementary schools; it would be nice if we could," Mason said.

"We need to start talking to children about what they want to do with life as soon as they enter school."

Elementary counselors are swamped. Peggy Schneider is the lone counselor for Eriksson, Fiegel and Farrand elementary schools in the Plymouth-Canton district, responsible for about 1,500 students.

"One of the things that's a challenge is when I'm working with a child one-on-one, and often that includes working with parents," said Schneider, who presents a four-week series to every class at each of her schools. The series deals with topics like bullying, anger management and friendship skills.

Pat Martin, vice president of the College Board, which administers the SAT college entrance exam, said her organization considers elementary counselors crucial because children are set on the path to college in the early grades.

"They can seal their fate as early as elementary school because by the time you get to middle school, the kids who are low-performing are not allowed to take courses like foreign languages and algebra," Martin said.

"They are virtually tracked, and it starts in elementary school."

Some small, rural school districts have no counselors at all. And charter and parochial high schools have few, if any. Faraj, who last year attended Cesar Chavez Academy, a Detroit charter school, said she had no contact with a counselor during her freshman year, when students often chart their high school academic plan. She also had not spoken with a counselor about academic issues so far this year at Western International.

#### Close bonds work wonders

The Southfield school district has no elementary school counselors. For grades six through 12, counselors' caseloads are limited to 300 students.

Southfield High senior Chudni Baker, 16, has met with her guidance counselor regularly since the ninth grade. That's the way it's supposed to work.

"He helps me with my classes if I need a class change, and he makes sure I have all my requirements to graduate," Baker said of her counselor, Michael Ogden.

"He asked me when I was a freshman what I wanted to be in life, and I told him I wanted to be an entrepreneur and own a business. He recommended accounting, marketing and business finance, because those are the classes I will use in my future."

"We're trying to gear their educational experience to them, and you have to know the student fairly well to even come close to being able to know that," Ogden said.

"If I don't know the student, I don't know what their dreams are, what their goals are, what their strengths and their weaknesses are."

Many counselors also lament that they are saddled with administrative tasks that have nothing to do with counseling.

"Paperwork seems to be the most common gripe across the field," said Amanda Harting, education coordinator for the American School Counselor Association.

"They're putting them in charge of administrative tasks when this is a professional with a master's degree." Even where counselors are in place, quality questions have been raised. The presidents of the University of

Michigan and Michigan State University attracted statewide attention in June with comments that students weren't getting adequate counseling.

Although they later suggested that the comments had been misrepresented, Michael P. Flanagan, state superintendent of public instruction, acknowledged the counseling system "needs work."

Harry Clay, president of the Michigan School Counselor Association, believes state leaders must address the inadequacy of guidance delivered to Michigan children if they hope to improve the education in the state, and the number of college graduates.

In 1991, Michigan adopted a Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Program, which outlines the objectives, standards and components that should shape school guidance programs across the state. But there is no requirement that districts adhere to the program, and only about 40 percent of Michigan school districts are using it, Clay said. "There wasn't any follow-through, and districts went right back to responding to whatever came in the door," Clay said.